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THE ROMAN MARMORARI¹

BY

GIACOMO BONI

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*Read at a meeting of the British and American Archaeological Society
of Rome, March 28th 1893.*



ROME

TIPOGRAFIA NAZIONALE DI G. BERTERU

VIA UMBRIA

—
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THE ROMAN MARMORARII

Marmorarii, or marble-workers, as they called themselves, were those Roman artists, architects, sculptors and mosaic decorators who, during the XIIth, XIIIth and beginning of the XIVth centuries, were occupied at Rome and in the neighbouring towns and provinces, in erecting, or carving, or encrusting with gold and enamel tessere those beautiful cloisters, those porticoes, those altars and crowning canopies, those ambones or pulpits, those parapets and pavements, those candelabras, those episcopal chairs, those tombs and shrines, which, from the Christian name of *Cosma*, or Cosimo, of one of the marmorarii, were ascribed to the style of the « Cosmati » or *Cosmatesque*.

The works of the Roman marmorarii have occupied the researches of many art critics and archæologists; among the most learned we may quote that of Count Promis, whose work was much improved by Comm. G. B. De Rossi who published a much more exact reading of the inscriptions and some notices about monuments of the same school, now lost. Also may be mentioned an interesting chapter out of Prof. Camillo Boito's *Architettura del medio evo in Italia*, and a simple Catalogue of the reproductions of mediæval decorations sent by the city of Rome to the Turin exhibition of 1884, by Mr. Stevenson, which is valuable both for its learning and correctness.

The origin and development of the art of the *marmorarii* has caused much discussion. It is now agreed that there was a Romanesque school of architecture, to which is due the simple and diminutive arcades, supported by slender shafts, which surrounded the court-yards of monasteries and decorated the tops of towers or fortified houses with small double or triple windows, not ungraceful in themselves, but so narrow and modest as to provoke the derision of Renaissance architects, who called them *gabbie da grilli*, or « crickets' cages ». Only a few fragments of the primitive Romanesque windows and other features of domestic architecture remain, but of the cloisters which exhibit the primitive rudeness or unadorned simplicity

we can mention, among others, those of S. Lorenzo, those within the convents of S. Cecilia and of the S. S. Quattro Incononati, of S. Cosimato and of S. Sabina. They have the same relation to the richly decorated cloisters of Rome as the cloisters of Cefalù have to their Sicilian rivals of Monreale.

The mosaic decorations which became the most characteristic works of the marmorarii, point undoubtedly to a Byzantine derivation, but we find them introduced by the Saracens among the decorations of the Ziza palace at Palermo, and in the hands of the Saracens the geometrical combinations of mosaic patterns were carried out to such an extent as to afford a most rich collection of gold and enamel backgrounds for sculptures, besides frames and bands to decorate plain surfaces. The Norman tombs in the cathedral of Palermo, Roger's apartment and the Palatine chapel, the King's throne and the Bishop's cathedra in the Duomo of Cefalù are the most characteristic among the ninth century monuments in Sicily showing a distinct and very close artistic relationship to the works of the Roman *marmorarii*. But the crowning glory of Sicilian monuments of this kind is undoubtedly the Cloister of Monreale, whose columns display the richest variety of forms, sculpture and mosaic decorations and whose capitals have no rivals among those of contemporary buildings of South Italy. Upon the abacus of one of these capitals of Monreale the sculptor has engraved his name thus:

EGO CONSTANTINVS ROMANVS MARMORARIVS.

He who could carve a capital like that one, and perhaps some others of the same cloister, had an inventive artistic talent and possessed a keenness of perception for what is beautiful in natural forms and an accuracy of execution that was developed when he worked at his own home, which enabled him to assimilate an idea of those forms of beauty, new to him, among which he worked, an impression which he carried along with him and which he could not fail to apply when an opportunity presented itself and when material conditions were such as to facilitate the taking advantage of such an opportunity.

Rome gradually emerged in the XIIth century from the state of degradation into which architecture, and architectural decorations, in fact every branch of the fine arts, had sunk and that with such a rapid descent that it is quite easy to trace it from the mosaics of St. Pudenziana (Vth century) to those of St. Marco (IXth century); but the revival took place when the remaining monuments of ancient Rome had already been used for new purposes or were reduced to an entire state of ruin. The idea of turning into something useful and beautiful the fragments of the Roman ruins themselves, not to preserve the memory of the primitive buildings, but to take full advantage of their chiselled and coloured surfaces, was an old one, and had

been turned to some purpose by the Gothic Kings. However, between the VIth century, the age of Theodoric, and of the early basilicas at Rome and at Ravenna, and the XIIth century, the age of the crusades and of the Romanesque architecture, a great change had taken place, the inhabitants had sunk from the level which had enabled them to conceive Christian architecture with Pagan proportions and were further changed by the invasion of Saracenic ideas which were derived from or influenced by Byzantine and Persian origin.

Unfortunately I have not yet been able to trace out a complete history of the mosaic decorations which are characteristic of the works of the Roman *marmorarii*; still more unfortunately most of the original sources have been scattered and lost long ago, but this may be partly atoned for by comparing the mosaic decorations of Rome and of the Campagna with those of Naples, Salerno and Sicily. The changes in these decorations may almost be compared to the changes in the dialects of these provinces; at Rome they possess some of the Roman influence, at Naples they show signs of Greek influence, at Palermo and Cefalù they become almost purely Arabic.

The germ of this kind of decoration could not find a better soil for its fecundation than that of Rome, where slabs of marble of all kinds and large drums of porphyry columns were ready to hand for anyone desiring to avail himself of quarries, formed not by the unconscious process of geological laws, but by the accumulated labour of several hundreds of years, of generation after generation of conquerors and artists, who had stored and worked materials sufficient for the outward splendour of the capital of the Roman Empire. The same germ was quickly sterilised on other soils, and when the Roman *marmorarii* themselves, though well equipped with skill and material means, tried to import this style of architectural decoration into countries which had no architectural ruins on which to exercise it, nor the amount of sunlight required by slender arcades, delicate mouldings and plain surfaces variegated by geometrical patterns in mosaics of glass gold and mother of pearl, they never succeeded in forming a permanent school of their own.

The work of the Roman *Marmorarii* we are speaking of, (they were so called by Cassiodorus as early as the VIth century) extended from the beginning of the XIIth to the end of the XIIIth century and during that period the history of several of them has been studied whose names are found engraved on the monuments which they decorated. The following particulars are taken from my notes on the subject and will convey some idea of the amount of work done by them.

The earliest name mentioned in the twelfth century is that of Paolo, who executed the work on the ciborium of the cathedral of Ferentino between the years 1106 and 1110, on which he engraved his name, thus: *hoc opifex*

magnus fecit vir nomine Paulus. He laid the pavement of the choir of S. Peter's, a fragment of which is preserved in the casino of Pius IV in the Vatican Gardens and is inscribed: *bona dextra Pauli.*

Four sons of Paul, John, Peter, Angel and Saxon, executed the ciborium of the basilica of S. Lorenzo fuori le mura in 1148 and inscribed upon it :

† *Johs. Petrus, Angelus et Sasso filii Pauli marmorarii huius operis magistri fuerunt .*

† *Ann. D . M . C . XL . VIII ego Hugo humilis abbas hoc opus fieri feci .*

and six years later a ciborium for the church of S. Mark, and about the same date a third one for the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme, now lost. The ciborium erected at SS. Cosmo and Damiano by Cardinal Guidoni, who died A. D. 1153, bore the inscription :

† *Johs . Petrus . Angelus . Sasso . filii Pauli hujus operis magistri fuerunt .*

Nicolò, a son of Angelo, worked about the years 1170-1180, the candelabrum (Paschal candlestick) of S. Paolo, which bears also the signature of his associate: Petrus Bassalletus; an altar at Sutri and some other works in the crypt of S. Bartolommeo in Isola, at S. Alessio and in the Lateran basilica.

Rainerius or Ranucius was the name of the head of another family of *marmorarii*; he engraved his own name and those of his two sons, Nicolò and Pietro, on a double window in the church of S. Silvestro in Capite, now preserved on the ground floor in the Ministry of Public Works. Pietro carved the doorway of the church of S. Maria di Castello at Corneto (1143), and Nicolò the double window which decorates the façade of the same church. Nicolò together with his sons John and Guitto carved the ciborium which still remains in the church of Ponzano. John and Guitto together carved the ciborium of S. Maria at Corneto (1168), and another John, a son of Guitto, the pulpit of the same church (1209).

A marmorario, named John, carved his name on the ambo of S. Peter at Alba Fucense: *Iohannes civis romanus et collega Andreas magister romanus.*

Laurentius, the head of a third family of Roman marmorarii, boasts of the largest number of descendants and of the largest and, what is still more important, the most beautiful works of the Cosmatesque school of architecture, dating from the beginning of the twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century. We have no work bearing the name of Laurentius alone, he being always mentioned with that of his son Jacobus, as in the ambones of the Ara Coeli, the best work of the primitive style of the *marmorarii*. One of these ambones, which has been recently restored in a

careless manner, bears upon one of the panels at the back the inscription *Laurentius cum* and upon a panel in the front of it the remaining words: *Jacobo filio suo hujus operis magister fuit.*

Other works bearing the names of these two artists are: the entrance gate of the church of S. Maria at Falleri: † *Laurentius cum Jacobo filio suo hoc opus fecerunt*, and that of the cathedral of Civita Castellana: † *Laurentius cum Jacobo filio suo magistri doctissimi romani hoc opus fecerunt.* An inscription, now lost, from the basilica of S. Pietro read thus:

† *hoc opus ex auro vitris Laurentius egit cum Jacobo nato sculpsit simul atque peregit.*

The ciborium of the church of the S. S. Apostoli bore the inscription:

† *Laurentius cum Jacobo filio suo hujus operis magistri.*

Jacobus, the son of Laurentius, is the author of the left entrance gate still remaining on the façade of the cathedral of Civita Castellana, bearing the inscription: *Magister Jacobus me fecit.* We also read his name (*Jacobus Laurentii*) on a band of mosaic decorating the left central shaft of the portico in front of the same Cathedral. Two columns decorated with mosaic incrustations are standing on each side of the episcopal chair at S. Alessio; one of them bears the inscription: † *Jacobus Laurentii fecit has decem et novem columpnas cum capitellis suis.* The entrance gate of the church of S. Saba bears an inscription dated A. D. 1205 and testifying that it was also made *per manus magistri Jacobi.*

The portico in front of the cathedral of Civita Castellana is, from an architectural point of view, the most important work of the Roman marmorarii; it dates from the beginning of the XIIIth century and bears the names of Jacobus and of his son Cosma, who originated the title of *Cosmatesque* given to the style itself. The inscription runs as follows: † *Magister Jacobus civis romanus cum Cosma filio suo fieri fecit hoc opus anno Domini MCCX.....* The door-way of the church of S. Tommaso in Formis, not far from the arch of Dolabella and belonging to the Trinitarians (an Order founded by Innocent III A. D. 1218) is also a work of Jacobus and Cosma, and bears the inscription: *Magister Jacobus cum filio suo Cosimato fecit hoc (sic) opus.*

Cosma laid the mosaic pavement of the cathedral of Anagni, upon which are engraved the words: *Magister Cosmas hoc opus fecit* (about 1224) and he also worked in the crypt of S. Magnus, as is proved by the inscription: *Anno Domini M. CC. XXX. I. per manu magistri Cosme civis romanus fuit amotum altare.*

The mediæval ciborium of the church of S. S. Giovanni e Paolo at Rome bore the inscription: † *Magister Cosmas fecit hoc opus.*

Two sons of Cosma, named Jacobus and Lucas, helped their father in laying the pavement of the cathedral of Anagni, as we read in the inscription:

Cosmas civis romanus cum filii suis Luca et Jacobo hoc opus fecit. They also helped him with various works in the crypt of S. Magnus, one of the stairs bearing the inscription: † *Magister Cosma civis romanus cum filiis suis Luca et Jacobo fecit* (about A. D. 1231). The cloister of S. Scolastica at Subiaco is also the work of Cosma and his two sons, all of them being mentioned in the inscription: *Cosmas et filii Lucas et Jacobus alter romani cives in marmoris arte periti hoc opus explerunt abbatis tempore Landi.* Landus was abbot of that celebrated Benedictine convent about A. D. 1235. Jacobus is recorded in another inscription of the same cloister: † *Magister Jacobus romanus fecit hoc opus.*

Another Cosma, probably a nephew of the preceding one, built the Sancta Sanctorum chapel at S. John Lateran and engraved upon it this inscription: *Magister Cosmatus fecit hoc opus* (A. D. 1277). This second Cosma is supposed to be the father of Deodatus and Jacobus, who laid the pavement of the Church of S. Giacomo alla Lungara, upon which Crescimbeni read the inscription: *Deodatus filius Cosmati et Jacobus fecerunt hoc opus.* Deodatus was the artist of the splendid ciborium, some fragments of which are kept in the Lateran cloisters, bearing the inscription: *Magister Deodatus fecit hoc opus*; also of the ciborium of S. Maria in Cosmedin, in front of which are engraved the words: *Deodatus me fecit* (about A. D. 1291). An inscription in the church of S. Pietro in columna at Tivoli reads thus: *Magister Deodatus fecit hoc opus.* A Roman *Marmorario*, also named Deodatus, worked, A. D. 1332, on the façade of the Duomo of Teramo.

A son of Cosma, named John, the best representative of this glorious family of artists, left us three important works; the tomb of Bishop Durand in the church of the Minerva (A. D. 1296), bearing the inscription: *Johannes filius magistri Cosmati fecit hoc opus*; the tomb of Cardinal Gonsalvo at S. Maria Maggiore (A. D. 1299) inscribed: *hoc opus fecit Johannes magistri Cosme civis romanus* and the tomb of Stefanus de Surdi at S. Balbina (about 1303) inscribed: *Johannes filius magistri Cosmati fecit hoc opus.*

Petrus Bassallettus who, as we said previously, took some part in executing the sculptures decorating the candelabrum of S. Paolo, was also the author of some work in the cathedral of Segni (A. D. 1185), now lost. Together with his son Vassallettus he began the celebrated Lateran cloisters, the son carrying out the work, as is demonstrated by the following verses copied by Sismondi: *Nobilis et doctus hac Vassallettus in arte*

Cum patre coepit opus quod solus perficit ipse.

Some beautiful fragments, consisting of marble slabs, twisted columns and cornices have been put together by Señor Villegas to form a shrine in his studio; they are supposed to have belonged to the church of S. Apollinare in Rome, and bear the inscription: † *Magister Bassallettus me fecit.* The name of Petrus Bassallettus occurs in an inscription in the cathedral of Sutri, dated 1186.

The chair of S. Andrea at Anagni, commissioned by Bishop Lando, A.D. 1263, is inscribed *Vasaletus de Roma*, and on the candelabrum of the cathedral are engraved the words: *Vassaletus me fecit*. On the marble lion in the church of the S.S. Apostoli is engraved the name † *Bassalletus*, and on a small shrine at Viterbo we read: *M. Vassallectus me fecit*. The door-way of S. Pudenziana was inscribed: † *Magister Vassallettus fecit hoc opus*.

Several other works of the Roman *marmorarii* bear names which have no connection with the histories already traced; others are either anonymous or reduced to a fragmentary condition, so that it is only possible to compare them, from a technical point of view, with a masterpiece bearing a date or a name. Among the most important of these works which can be studied in Rome may be mentioned the porch of the church of S. Antonio; the tombs of the Savelli and that of Matteo di Acquasparta at the Aracoeli; the canopy at S. Cecilia attributed to Arnolfo; the marble screen, episcopal chair and marble pulpit of S. Cesareo; the choir, ambones, canopy and episcopal chair at S. Clemente; the canopy and some decorations of the confession at S. Giorgio in Velabro; the statue of Pope Nicolò IV and other remains at S. Giovanni Laterano; a few remains at S. Giovanni a Porta Latina; the pavements of the churches of S. S. Giovanni e Paolo and S. Grisogono, etc.; the porch of the basilica of S. Lorenzo fuori le mura (1216), the episcopal chair (1251) and the tomb of Cardinal Fieschi (1256) in the same basilica; the ambones at S. Maria in Cosmedin, together with the tomb of Alfanus (1123) and the basement of the candelabrum, bearing the inscription: *Vir probus et doctus Paschalis rite vocatus, summo cum studio condidit hunc cereum*. In the church of S. Nereo ed Achilleo is well worthy of notice a pulpit, which Cardinal Baronio took from the church of S. Silvestro in Capite, the balustrade of the choir, also an ambo with candelabrum, the ciborium and the episcopal chair; the cloisters of S. Paolo fuori le mura, a magnificent work, inferior only to those of the Lateran; they bear the inscription: *Magister Petrus fecit hoc opus (1241)*; the ciborium of S. Paolo, a wonderful work of Arnolfus, bears the date 1285 and the inscription: *hoc opus fecit Arnolfus cum socio suo Petro*; the tomb of Pope Boniface VIII in the Vatican Grottoes, also by Arnolfus, the sepulchre of Cardinal de Troyes at S. Prassede (1286); some fragments before the high altar of S. Saba; the sepulchral slab of Munio di Zamora, a general of the Dominican order upon the floor of the nave at S. Sabina (1300).

Among the most important works of the Roman *marmorarii* in the campagna and neighbouring provinces may be mentioned a candelabrum and some fragments at Alatri; a beautiful ambone and the iconostasis at Alba Fucense; an orchestra balustrade and several others at S. Francesco d'Assisi, amongst which is specially worthy of note a wonderful rose window, a chapel

in the castle of Carsoli; the ciborium and ambone at Castel S. Elia; a candelabrum at S. Clemente Casauria (Abruzzi); the pulpit of the cathedral of Fondi bearing the inscription:

Tabula marmorea vitreis distincta lapillis
 Doctoris studio sic est erecta Joannis
 Romano geniti cognomine Nicolao.

supposed to be the work of the same John who worked at Corneto in the façade (1143) and in the ciborium (1158); the episcopal chair of the same cathedral was also by the Roman, John Nicolaus (1180). The ambo and the parapets of S. Pietro at Gaeta; the tomb of Cardinal de Bray at Orvieto, exquisitely carved and inlaid with mosaic, bearing the inscription: *Hoc opus fecit Arnolphus* (1282) which exhibits much of the influence of the Roman marmorarii, as well as that of Benedict XIth (1305) at S. Domenico of Perugia, a work of John of Pisa; the ambo by Magister Nicolaus de Bartolomeo di Foggia (1272) at Ravello, as well as those of Salerno and Sessa, together with the candelabra of these churches, showing a more southern influence: the pulpit of the Duomo of Scala, the church of S. Giorgio at Riofreddo, the pulpit and canopy in the parish church of Rocca di Botte. The cloister of Sassovivo is almost a rival to those of Rome; the inscription engraved upon one of its pilasters records that it was built *a magistro Petro de Maria, romano opere et Mastria* in the year 1229 and it was therefore supposed to be an Umbrian imitation of the Roman style; but imitators could not attain at once to such perfect mastery in the technical execution as is shown by the cloister of Sassovivo, which I attribute to Roman marble workmanship.

The cathedral of Terracina offers a large field for investigation to students of this subject in its shrines, episcopal chair, candelabrum, pavement, porticus with mosaic frieze and the sepulchre of martyrs. Not far from Toscanella may be studied the ruins of the abbey of S. Giusto; some fragments are extant in the church of S. Clemente at Viterbo; a mosaic pavement remains at S. Francesco of Vetralla. At Viterbo are well worthy of notice the tombs of Pope Clement IVth, of Pope Hadrian Vth, who died there in 1276, and of the Prefects of Vico in the church of S. Francesco, besides a sphinx in the church of S. Maria a Gradi inscribed: *Hoc opus fecit fr. Pascalis romanus ord. pd. a. d. M. CC. LXXYVI*, which may be compared with that of the candelabrum of S. Maria in Cosmedin.

Before closing this brief review, I must ask leave to mention some important works of a Roman marble worker which I admired very much a few years ago at Westminster Abbey and about which I am indebted to Mr. Mickelthwaite, the learned English architect, for some interesting notes. They consist of a small tomb bearing no inscription but believed to be the daughter of Henry III, who died A. D. 1257. The basement of the shrine of

Edward the Confessor bears the following inscription, only a portion of which is readable:

Anno mileno domini cum septuageno
 Et bis centeno cum completo quasi deno
 Hoc opus est factum quod Petrus duxit in actum
 Romanus civis. Homo causam noscere si vis in actum
 Rex fuit Henricus Sancti praesentis amicus.

The relics of Edward the Confessor were laid in the place of honour by Henry III, A. D. 1269. The inscription was also studied by Mr. Stevenson in a MS. copy of the XV century kept in the British Museum.

The tomb of King Henry III, the second founder of Westminster Abbey, erected A. D. 1281, has nothing English about it, save the grey Purbeck marble. The bronze figure resting upon it is English work but ten years later.

The pavement of *opus alexandrinum* before the high altar was laid A. D. 1268 and bore the inscription: *Tertius Henricus rex, urbs, Odericus et Abbas hos composuere porphyreos lapides*. The Abbot, Richard of Ware, paid a visit to Rome after his election, which took place A. D. 1258. He died A. D. 1283, and upon his grave may be read the following words:

HIC PORTAT LAPIDES QVOS HVC PORTAVIT AB VRBE

that is to say, that he lies buried under the red and green porphyries, the traditional elements of the *opus alexandrinum*, which he brought himself from Rome to England.

No matter how great was the liberality of the medieval Abbot in providing precious materials, how great his care in selecting one of the most skilful among the Roman *marmorarii*, the attempt to transplant a style of work, which could only find its proper nourishment among the ruins of an ancient city, was not successful. This is proved by some attempts to imitate the work of the *romanus civis*, a few traces of which still remain at Westminster, and perhaps also by the pavement of Canterbury Cathedral whose features, not purely Italian, may be the work of an English copyist.





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